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Keywords

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The Correlation Between Attachment Style, Self-Esteem, and Psychological Well-Being of Fatherless Women Ages 25–55

Danielle M. Frazier and Rebecca G. Cowan

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there is a correlation between the attachment style, self-esteem, and psychological well-being of women ages 25–55 whose fathers were absent during childhood. Results indicated a statistically significant correlation between attachment style and self-esteem. Implications for practice are provided.

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The U.S. Census Bureau (2019) reported that 23.6% (17.4 million) of all children younger than 18 years old live in homes without fathers. (In this article, *father* refers to biological and nonbiological fathers, including stepfathers, adoptive fathers, and foster fathers.) The impact of growing up without a father has a wide range of implications. James et al. (2012) found that girls who grew up without fathers were more likely to engage in sexual intercourse at an earlier age than those who grew up with fathers. Studies have also found that girls in father-absent homes were more likely to commit crimes (Simpson et al., 2012). Additionally, according to Newland et al. (2013), the attachment between fathers and children is associated with school outcomes.

The absence of a father can occur as a result of several factors, such as non-marital birth/cohabitation, desertion, separation/divorce, incarceration, and death (Pougnnet et al., 2012). Father absence in families is more common in recent years

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as a result of social changes in family structure (Pew Research Center, 2010). For instance, in 1960, approximately 87% of children under age 18 lived with two married parents; by 2008, that number had dropped to 64%. Research indicates that 40% of children in the United States do not have fathers present in their lives (National Center for Fathering, n.d.) and about 50% of U.S. children will live in a single-parent home during a portion of their childhood, most without fathers (Mather, 2010).

ATTACHMENT STYLE

Attachment theory asserts that individuals’ attachment experiences with their primary caregivers influence their tendency to explore, interact with, and master external environments (Bowlby, 1973). According to Bowlby (1979), the attachment system is active “from the cradle to the grave” (p. 129) and includes three styles: secure, avoidant, and ambivalent (Bowlby, 1980). Those with a secure attachment style tend to have higher self-esteem and positive intimate relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). An avoidant attachment style can hinder an individual’s ability to form close and intimate relationships because of a low self-concept (Erol & Orth, 2013). Individuals with an ambivalent attachment style might appear preoccupied within the context of their relationships and often have a negative concept of self (Erol & Orth, 2013).

SELF-ESTEEM

Neff (2011) described *self-esteem* as an “evaluation of our worthiness as individuals, a judgment that we are good valuable people” (p. 1). A study by Luo et al. (2012) found that children who experienced the absence of their fathers had lower self-esteem. They also found that middle school girls displayed lower self-esteem when the absence of their father happened before the age of 2 years old (Luo et al., 2012). Conversely, researchers have found that the self-esteem of daughters can be positively influenced by their fathers (Allgood et al., 2012; Carlson, 2006). According to Katz and van der Kloet (2010), females who have positive attachments to their fathers also have a greater sense of self-worth and value.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Psychological well-being is defined as a combination of feeling capable, happy, and well-supported, as well as having a sense of life satisfaction (Huppert, 2009). Francis (2012) asserted that fathers play a vital role in the development of their daughters’ psychological well-being. For instance, Allgood et al. (2012) found that whereas some girls were able to achieve academic success without the support of their fathers, others had problems with adult and peer relationships. This finding provides support to the idea that a close, affectionate, and caring relationship with one’s father during childhood strongly correlates with

the overall satisfaction that daughters will experience in adulthood (Allgood et al., 2012).

Given the prevalence of fatherlessness, professional counselors may provide increasing services to individuals from father-absent families throughout their life course (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). (In this article, the terms *father absence* and *fatherlessness* are used interchangeably.) According to McLanahan et al. (2013), the research base examining any longer term effects of father absence on adult outcomes is notably small. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine whether there is a statistically significant correlation between the attachment style, self-esteem, and psychological well-being of women ages 25–55 whose fathers were absent 1 year or more before the age of 18.

METHOD

Procedure

After obtaining institutional review board approval, we recruited participants by contacting alumni from a local college, posting information at libraries and community boards, and advertising the study on various websites. In SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>), participants were invited to complete a screening questionnaire, an informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and three instruments: the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965), and the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (PWB; Ryff, 1989).

Participants

Participants consisted of women ages 25–55 who were fatherless at least 1 year before the age of 18. The mean age of the participants was 35.05 years ($SD = 8.71$), and the mean age of fatherlessness was 7.79 years ($SD = 6.32$). We used nonprobability as our sampling strategy and purposive criterion sampling as our design. Assuming a moderate effect size at a power of .80, we sought a minimum sample of 92 participants (Cohen, 1992). A total of 180 responses were received; however, 59 respondents were not included in the final analysis because they did not complete all of the research materials, and five participants did not meet the criteria for this study. As a result, 116 participants (63.8% White, 17.2% Black, 8.6% multiracial, 3.5% Hispanic, 3.5% other, and 3.5% missing) were included in this study. (Percentages do not total 100 because of rounding.) Each participant had the opportunity to be entered into a drawing for a chance to win a \$50 Amazon gift card.

Measures

ECR-R. The ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000) consists of 36 items designed to measure attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), and the estimated completion time is 5–10 minutes. The ECR-R was normed

on adult men and women with an average age of 27 years. It has demonstrated suitable convergent and discriminant validity (Sibley & Liu, 2004) and high reliability (Fraley et al., 2000; Wei et al., 2007). The ECR-R has Cronbach's alphas of .93 (Anxiety subscale) and .95 (Avoidance subscale; Wei et al., 2007).

RSE. The RSE (Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item instrument designed to measure self-esteem. Respondents rate each item on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *strongly agree*), and the scale has an estimated completion time of 5 minutes. Total scores range from 0 to 30, with a score less than 15 indicating problematic low self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). The RSE was normed on a variety of populations, including parents, high school students, and civil servants. The measure has shown construct and criterion validity (Bagley et al., 1997) and high reliability (Rosenberg, 1965). Internal consistency was .77, and the minimum coefficient of reproducibility was at least .90 (Rosenberg, 1965). The RSE has a test-retest correlation between .82 and .88 and a Cronbach's alpha between .77 and .88 (Bagley et al., 1997).

PWB. The PWB (Ryff, 1989) is a widely used questionnaire for social science research. It measures positive aspects of psychological functioning along six dimensions: autonomy, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). It consists of 84 items, which are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*), and the estimated completion time is 15–20 minutes. The PWB was normed on adults 25 years or older (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and was validated on a sample of 321 well-educated, socially connected, financially comfortable, and physically healthy men and women (Ryff, 1989). The internal consistency coefficients were high (between .86 and .93), and the test-retest reliability coefficients for a subsample of the participants over 6 weeks were also high (between .81 and .88; Springer & Hauser, 2006).

Data Analysis

After uploading the raw data into SPSS (Version 25), we conducted descriptive and inferential analyses. We used multiple linear regression to determine whether there was a correlation. According to Asiltürk and Çunkaş's (2011), multiple linear regression is a predictive analysis that attempts to determine the relationship between one constant dependent variable and two or more constant independent variables. In this study, the analysis explored the potential correlation between attachment style, self-esteem, and psychological well-being in women ages 25–55 whose fathers were absent 1 year or more before the age of 18.

RESULTS

One assumption of multiple linear regression is multivariate normality, and a preassessment of this assumption can be conducted on individual variables to better understand the subsequent multivariate assessment (Warner, 2013). We

analyzed the trait of each variable by calculating the descriptive statistics for the variables that were being used. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the following variables: attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance, self-esteem, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, self-acceptance, and overall psychological well-being.

This study investigated whether there is a significant correlation between attachment style and psychological well-being and whether there is a significant correlation between attachment style and self-esteem. We analyzed both psychological well-being and self-esteem using multiple linear regression, which included both attachment-related anxiety and avoidance, as well as three covariates. The data met both assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity. The covariates were current age, age of fatherlessness, and race/ethnicity. We conducted regression analyses to determine the influence of these covariates. The first regression assessed the influence of the covariates on overall psychological well-being. The results of the multiple linear regression model were not significant, $F(3, 107) = 0.93, p = .428, R^2 = .03$, indicating that current age, age of fatherlessness, and race/ethnicity did not explain a significant proportion of the variance in overall psychological well-being. Because the overall model was not significant, we did not examine the individual predictors further. The second regression assessed the covariates' influence on self-esteem. The results of the multiple linear regression model were not significant, $F(3, 108) = 1.76, p = .159, R^2 = .05$, indicating that current age, age of fatherlessness, and race/ethnicity did not explain a significant proportion of the variance in self-esteem. Because the overall model was not significant, we did not examine the individual predictors further.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>SEM</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
Attachment-related anxiety	4.26	1.42	116	0.13	-0.29	-0.62
Attachment-related avoidance	3.61	1.11	116	0.10	0.07	-0.46
Self-esteem	2.69	0.68	116	0.06	0.23	-0.42
Autonomy	3.63	0.33	116	0.03	-0.40	0.61
Environmental mastery	3.66	0.31	115	0.03	0.14	-0.19
Personal growth	3.93	0.59	115	0.06	0.12	-0.55
Positive relations with others	4.10	0.59	115	0.05	-0.04	-1.00
Purpose in life	3.51	0.36	115	0.03	-0.26	1.05
Self-acceptance	3.16	0.34	116	0.03	0.03	0.73
Overall psychological well-being	3.67	0.19	115	0.02	0.29	0.07

Note. *N* = 116.

Regarding the relationship between attachment style (i.e., attachment-related anxiety and avoidance) and psychological well-being, we analyzed psychological well-being using multiple linear regression. The results of the regression model were not significant, $F(2, 112) = 2.23, p = .113, R^2 = .04$, indicating that attachment-related anxiety and avoidance did not explain a significant proportion of the variance in overall psychological well-being. Because the overall model was not significant, we did not examine the individual predictors further.

Regarding the relationship between attachment style (i.e., attachment-related anxiety and avoidance) and self-esteem, we analyzed self-esteem using multiple linear regression. The results of the regression model were significant, $F(2, 113) = 33.62, p < .001, R^2 = .37$, indicating that 37% of the variance in self-esteem was explainable by attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. Attachment-related anxiety significantly predicted self-esteem, $B = -0.24, t(113) = -6.00, p < .001$. This shows that, on average, for every 1-unit increase in attachment-related anxiety, participants' self-esteem decreased by 0.24 units. Attachment-related avoidance also significantly predicted self-esteem, $B = -0.11, t(113) = -2.05, p = .043$. This shows that, on average, for every 1-unit increase in attachment-related avoidance, participants' self-esteem decreased by 0.11 units. That is, both attachment styles negatively correlated with lower self-esteem. The results of the regression model are shown in Table 2.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the relationship between attachment style, self-esteem, and psychological well-being of women ages 25–55 whose fathers were absent for at least 1 year during childhood. The results of the study were mixed in that data supported a correlation between attachment style and self-esteem but not between attachment style and psychological well-being. The absence of a significant correlation between attachment style and psychological well-being must be interpreted cautiously given that previous research has shown that adults who were fatherless as children were more likely to be psychologically maladjusted

TABLE 2

Results for Multiple Linear Regression With Attachment-Related Anxiety and Avoidance Predicting Self-Esteem

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	4.11	0.19	[3.73, 4.49]	0.00	21.49	<.001
Attachment-related anxiety	-0.24*	0.04	[-0.32, -0.16]	-0.51	-6.00	<.001
Attachment-related avoidance	-0.11*	0.05	[-0.21, 0.00]	-0.17	-2.05	.043

Note. $F(2, 113) = 33.62, p < .001, R^2 = .37$. CI = confidence interval.
 * $p < .05$.

during their adulthood (Hussain & Munaf, 2011). Thus, continued research regarding this hypothesis is warranted.

Our findings suggest that attachment style, which shapes lasting responses to relationships, is a strong predictor of one's self-esteem in adulthood. The correlation found in this study between attachment style and self-esteem is similar to that found in previous research with other populations (Doinita, 2015). Thus, our findings provide additional empirical support for the importance of offering parenting education programs during childhood that incorporate information regarding secure attachment of female children and their fathers and how these relationships may shape these children's emotions and future relationships.

Additionally, the results of this study justify the need for attachment-based information in programs for single-parent homes in cases of a father's death or a father's refusal to participate in the child's life. These programs could focus on improving children's support systems both within the family and externally. In turn, this may assist in improving the child's self-esteem, which could have long-term effects throughout adulthood. Our findings could also inform the standards used to make decisions in child custody cases. Current research indicates that there can be bias in decisions to determine parental custody with a preference for the mother over the father (Nouman et al., 2016). These types of biases and preferences may limit a father's visitation privileges and, in some cases, lead to a father's absence.

The results of this study provide further support of the importance of mental health professionals discussing the father-daughter relationship during therapeutic treatment, especially with clients presenting with low self-esteem. Counseling is a significant resource that serves as a sense of support to help both women and families navigate through the complexities of their lives related to fatherlessness (Burke, 2017). Counselors may decide to explore attachment style when working with clients who have experienced fatherlessness. Additionally, being able to better understand a client's attachment style may provide insight into how the client will respond in treatment with a counselor (Levy et al., 2011), and this knowledge may help to guide the counselor when choosing clinical interventions and techniques (Levy et al., 2011). Our findings also have the potential to allow fatherless adult women to understand how their relationship with their fathers might be related to the way they view themselves (e.g., low self-worth) and their interactions with others, particularly when it relates to peer and romantic relationships (Lopez & Corona, 2012). Additionally, the development of support groups for women identified as having self-esteem issues and who had limited involvement with their fathers may be beneficial.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, because computer access was required to complete the research materials, a segment of the targeted population may have been excluded because they did not have access to a computer.

Second, our findings cannot be generalized to all races and ethnicities given that the respondents were predominantly White (63.8%). The broadness of the definition of fatherlessness is another limitation. This study included women who may have had varying experiences with fathers (both biological and nonbiological) and father figures (e.g., uncle, male teacher, male coach) from early childhood through high school. These experiences and the age that they became fatherless may also affect self-esteem, attachment style, and psychological well-being. Finally, because there was no control group, a comparison could not be made between women who were and who were not fatherless before the age of 18.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies can be designed to compare findings between fatherless women and women who had a father present throughout childhood to determine whether fatherlessness itself is a predictor of negative self-esteem or psychological well-being. Additionally, studies could be designed to explore groups of women who became fatherless as a result of the same circumstance (e.g., death, divorce) in an effort to examine possible patterns or similarities. Finally, qualitative research could examine the perspectives of fathers on being separated from their children, which may reveal other barriers to fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives.

CONCLUSION

Father absence in families is more common in recent years as a result of social changes in family structure (Pew Research Center, 2010). However, limited information exists on the impact of father absence on adult women. The findings of this quantitative nonexperimental research revealed a statistically significant correlation between attachment style and self-esteem, but not between attachment style and psychological well-being, in a sample of women ages 25–55 who had experienced fatherlessness. It is hoped that this study’s findings will inspire future research regarding the impact of fatherlessness on adult women.

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